

Book Review  
**A Future for Presentism**

by C. Bourne  
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This book is meant as a defence of presentism, the view that only the present time and present entities exist. The book is divided in two parts. In Part I, the author first offers an overview of his metaphysical position; then, he shows how such a view can be combined with some of the most popular theories of time in solving the major philosophical issues related to time. In Part II, he attempts to reconcile presentism with relativity theory.

It is widely held that presentism is a view opposite to tenseless theories of time which currently dominates the philosophy of time (following Mc Taggart, “B-theories”) and contrary to tensed theories (“A-theories”). According to tenseless theories, all times are equally real and the present is not ontologically privileged. On this view, objects – things, events, facts – are thought as being “earlier than”, “later than” or “simultaneous with” *each other* and located by dates. In short, time does not flow. By contrast, tensed theories assign to the present a special metaphysical status and objects are “earlier than”, “later than” or “simultaneous with” *the present*. According to tensed theories, objects change their tenses in that they are future, become present and then past. Bourne is critical of both approaches and characterizes his version of presentism as the only substantial alternative to the tenseless theory.

In Chapter 1, the author articulates a solution to the “present problem”, namely the problem of explaining how we can know that our time is present and that we are not past. More specifically, the problem - that it raises when we endorse a pluralist position about time - is the following: “given that we do know we are present, and that it is absurd to doubt it, any adequate theory of time must find a way to guarantee such knowledge” (p. 21). For all tensed theories the present problem is insoluble. In fact, if we claim that the present is the moment of time that is metaphysically privileged, then the present is distinguished from whatever moment of time is picked out indexically when we use expressions such as “now” and “presently”. Thus, if we suppose that Socrates is real - as tense theorists admit- then his experience of present is no different than ours but his belief that he is in the present is false. According to the author, only tenseless theories and presentism can solve this problem. In order to explain how, he draws a difference between the *indexical* use (picks out the time at which it is used, called the ‘present’) and the *referential* use of present (refers to the privileged time of the tensed theory, called the \*present\*). Tenseless theories avoid the “present problem” because they deny that our time is ontologically privileged and recognize that the

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only sense of 'present' is the indexical sense. Presentism gives a solution to this problem as well: if we admit that present is the real time, then *ex hypothesi* we are in the present.

In Chapter 2, the author develops his version of presentism - called "Ersatzer Presentism"- that avoids problems traditionally associated with this position: sets of propositions of a certain type represent in relevant way past, present and future states of affairs and their cross-temporal relations. On this view, all times are abstract objects (sets of propositions) but only one of them has a concrete realization (the \*present\*) and past and future are ontologically on a par. Such a way of thinking about time - according to the author - allows us to have a full range of times without being committed to the existence of full-blown concrete non-present entities (such as Socrates or dinosaurs). This version of presentism establishes that pastly and futurally located tensed facts do not exist: all concrete facts are present facts and all other facts are abstract and hence tenseless. The position the author defends is essentially: "all of us should agree that the proposition "Socrates is teaching Plato" was, at some time, true" (p. 52). More specifically, "Socrates taught Plato" is made true by "the existence of a proposition that states this is the case for some time in the past, where a time is a set of propositions that states the other truths about what happens at that time" (p.52). These sets of propositions are ordered by what the author calls "the E-relation", something different from the genuine *earlier than* and *later than* relations since it does represent the *earlier than* and *later than* relations in the way it relates times rather than spatio-temporal objects. Thus, we have a time series related by *earlier than* and *later than* relations without being committed to the existence of real or concretely realized *relata*. Therefore, a particular time is a set of "unembedded" propositions (*u*-propositions, such as "It is now the case that it was the case that Socrates is sitting") and truthmakers are abstract objects and not concrete facts. So, if we follow this proposal, we can deal with a series of standard objections about transtemporal relations without invoking past and future objects and events. According to the author, there are several advantages in adopting this picture. First, this account allows us to state truths about the past and preserve the truth-value of past-tensed statements. Second, the best virtue is, according to him, that ersatzer presentism includes a more ontological parsimony: it does not postulate neither mysterious facts in the present to make past-tensed statements true nor past and future concrete objects as truthmakers for tensed statements.

In the rest of Part I, the author focuses on some problem faced by a defence of presentism. First, Mc Taggart's problem and the issues about the unreality of time (i.e.: all objects in the A-series have all three tenses, but these tenses are all incompatible with one another; therefore, the A-series contain a contradiction). Bourne argues that Mc Taggart's problem does not affect ersatzer presentism because - according to his view - only the present, and not the other tenses, has instances. Second, he analyzes a set of paradoxes and shows how the rejection of the existence of times other than the present fits with the idea that the abstract objects and possible individuals exist. Third, the author shows that adopting ersatzer presentism's "branching future" requires a non-bivalent logic but it does not entail abandoning the laws of the excluded middle and non-contradiction. The branching structure of times enables us to distinguish between past and future and account for the truth-value links between times: the E-relation is "a one-many relation in the direction from the present to future, and a one-one



relation in the direction from the present to the past” (p.55). Finally, the author addresses the problems of transtemporal relations and shows how presentism can formulate a theory of causation. In fact, it seems that, if causation is as a relation, then presentism cannot account for it. The reason is simple. It is widely accepted that, if  $c$  and  $e$  are events and we have a true instance of “ $c$  causes  $e$ ”, both  $c$  and  $e$  occur and  $c$  is earlier than  $e$ . But, if  $c$  comes to occurrence earlier than  $e$ , it follows - according to presentism - that when  $c$  comes to occurrence,  $e$  does not yet occur. In order to solve this problem, the author suggests to reduce transtemporal relations to casual relations. Only in this way, presentism can make use of any theory of causation (such as Hume’s regularity theory, Lewis’ counterfactual theories or Mellor’s probability-raising theories).

Part II of the book is entirely devoted to understanding of the philosophical issue surrounding presentism and special relativity. Chapter 5 is a quick introduction to the relevant physics and Chapter 6 concerns the Putnam-Stein debate (for Putnam, tensed talk has no place in special relativity; Stein preserves tensed talk in that context). In Chapter 7, the author explores the philosophical implications of some cosmology’s models that arise from general relativity and argues that tense theorist should rethink their strategy in dealing with theories of relativity. Chapter 8 offers an account for Gödel’s philosophy of time and shows that this view (the idea that time must be ideal) is too strong and leaves open the possibility for time travels.

Some questions arise for the version of presentism the author proposes. In particular, the view that times are sets of propositions creates some concerns when we have to do with past-tensed statements. If we accept the idea that times are set of propositions, it seems that the truth-value of a statement consists in what is necessary to establish (or to make) such statement true in the present. But, if we exclude that truthmakers are past facts and we rather state that they are propositions, where in the presentist’s world the truthmakers are to be asserted? Are propositions asserted and available in the past or in the present? Presentist’s view seems that a statement about the past, if true, must be true because a proposition such as “it is now the case that...” is available in the present. But, consider past-tensed statements for which we have lost any evidence in the present. It seems correct – from a presentist point of view - to say that an empirical statement about the past cannot be true or false if its truth condition is an observation made in the past and no more available in the present; and that the only way *in principle* available to us for establishing the truth of a statement in the past tense is on the ground of its present traces (documents, memories, testimonies). If so, the question here is: how is it possible to claim that a statement about the past is true or false when the opportunity to decide whether or not it holds good may be lost? How can ersatzer presentism guarantee the truth-value of this kind of statements; and what does ground the truth that those statements were true? The Presentist picture does not seem to offer an adequate answer to this.

Another objection is about the notion of truth and the uses of the principle of bivalence. A large class of statements is intelligible but undecidable and we are not in position to claim that they are determinately true or false before establishing them as true or as false (and we may never be in position to recognize them as true or as false). Now, a presentist can accept the view that a speaker (P) knows in the present the truth-value of a past sentence (S) if her



knowledge of  $S$  is manifested by the use that in the present  $P$  makes of  $S$ . This formulation is related to a conception of truth according to which the predicate “true” is identified with “correctly asserted in the present time”. If so, the truth of a sentence can be given only in virtue of the knowledge available at the present and this seems to be counterintuitive.

Despite these objections, the book is interesting and should be widely read. This review does not do full justice to the variety of topics the author deals with and to richness of the book. There are many good things to be said about it: this book provides an accessible and profound introduction to the topic and at the same time it expands the framework of the current theory of presentism. Besides, his examinations of the topic and his view are well worth to be discussed. This stimulating study is warmly recommended to anyone interested in the metaphysics of time and in the relations between philosophy and physics.